



NSW.ACT

Doorway to Where?

Young People Entering the Workforce

A NSW Synod Discussion Paper 1997

The 1997 meeting of the NSW Synod looked at some length at the issue of young people and the workplace. There is a video of the presentation made to synod (available for loan from UnitingCare NSW.ACT, or for purchase from the Youth Unit). The discussion paper *Doorway to Where?* was a report to the synod for this session, and was prepared by Ann Wansbrough in consultation with the Synod Youth Unit and Burnside. It includes questions for discussion and reflection.

The 1997 Synod referred the Discussion Paper to parishes and agencies for study and comment. Unfortunately, we received few comments and nothing was prepared for the 1998 Synod. Please send your comments now to Ann Wansbrough

Table of Contents

- 1997 Synod resolution 263/97S Youth entering the Workforce
- Doorway to where? Young people and the workplace
- Introduction
- Changes in the world of work
- Effects on young people
- Does it have to be this way?
- A values-based future?

RESOLVED THAT THE SYNOD

recognise that society and the church has let down young people by forsaking human, social, cultural and spiritual values for economic and material gain.

urge Congregations to gather young and older people to study the paper "Doorway to Where? Young People Entering the Workforce" and work through the questions together.

encourage congregations to commence action through at least three (3) local initiatives in response to the issues raised in the paper.

request congregations to send a copy of their responses to the paper and any resulting action or ideas to the Youth Unit.

Doorway to where? Young people and the workplace

Introduction

When I went to university in 1965, I held a teaching scholarship which paid my fees and a living allowance. Sure, I had to work as a teacher when I finished university, but that meant that I had a guaranteed job to go to. Whatever I did after that, I had a degree, no debt, and several years of teaching experience.

For reflection before, during and after synod:

Do you remember how you started your working life? How old were you? What was it like looking for employment? What did you know about work? Who told you about the sorts of jobs available? What did you expect from your employer? How did you feel about your work?

Was your situation typical of young people at the time? What would have been the experience of your age group who had different levels of education?

Changes in the world of work

The world of work has changed dramatically in the last decade, and will continue to do so into the foreseeable future.

Changes in responsibilities

Thirty years ago, many young people left school at the end of Year 9, knowing that they could get a job, perhaps unskilled, perhaps involving an apprenticeship. Employment conditions in unskilled and skilled jobs were covered by awards and monitored by strong unions. People often expected to work their way up the ladder, as they acquired skills and gained experience with the one employer.

The way young people experience the workplace is vastly different to past generations.

Now young people leaving before the end of Year 12 are often considered "drop outs", as if it was natural to stay at school until eighteen or nineteen no matter what your interest or ability. Overall, about one in five of those teenagers who want paid employment are unemployed, but in particular areas it can be more than double this. Many young people stay at school because they believe that it would be hard to get a job, or because they know that the only way to hope for a good working life is to finish high school and go to TAFE or University.

Completing a degree guarantees having a HECS debt, but does not guarantee a job. Many jobs are insecure and short term. Most people will probably change not only

their employer, but also the type of work they do, several times during their lifetime.

That is, while young people are expected to put effort into acquiring knowledge and skills for employment, society and employers make no commitment to value them in future years. Workers appear to be interchangeable cogs in the economic machine, not valued persons, created in God's image and having human dignity and rights. Yet even that is not carried through consistently: many young workers who seek to upgrade their qualifications encounter obstacles such as TAFE offering only a small fraction of the required number of places in some courses.

Employers want school leavers to be "work ready", as if it were the job of society and schools, not employers and experience, to equip people for work.

The public school system has had to re-define the nature of education. Education is no longer about learning to think and acquiring a sense of the world through basic academic subjects. The movement is towards acquiring skills which are "marketable" in "the labour market" - as if paid employment is the purpose for which human beings exist and the basic responsibility of life. Year 12 has become a do or die effort. It puts some young people in a situation where the pressure drives them to give up, give in or even to attempt taking their own lives.

Changes in the jobs available

Some young people are fortunate - they get their first jobs through family or friends. For many young people, however, entering the workforce can be a traumatic and disillusioning experience. Many old jobs have disappeared. Even where jobs still have the same name, they can be very different from twenty years ago. Training and education are different too. Parents and friends often know little about the new jobs that are available, let alone about the sorts of jobs that might be available in a few years time, or about the courses being offered. Yet young people are expected to make education choices that will equip them for a first job perhaps three or more years away.

As young people look at the often confusing world of education, training and work, they have hanging over their head the spectre of unemployment. Except for those with the greatest intelligence, education, and family guidance and support, who will survive anywhere, the world of work can be a gamble. The stakes are high - the ability to survive in a society that is losing its sense of communal responsibility, and is becoming more punitive even as it creates new problems.

Jobs are being lost from traditional industries that were well served by unions and awards, and being created in new industries where unionisation is being discouraged. So-called "enterprise bargaining" is usually little more than individual contracts, with individual employees having no choice but to accept whatever wages and conditions are offered. The same Employment Advocate who is supposed to protect the interests of workers, provides advice to employers about what the law requires. Independent arbitration is becoming a thing of the past.

Changes in working conditions

Many jobs are casual, part-time, or involve odd hours. At the same time as we have large numbers of unemployed people, we have many people who are forced to overwork. "Family" is said to be important, but in the world of work today, you are expected to take whatever job is on offer - even if it involves two hours travel each way a day, taking time from one's family. Or even if it involves working nights and weekends. Community life is also devalued, as unemployed people are told they should be prepared to uproot themselves from their local community and move to wherever there happens to be jobs for the time being.

Our houses are becoming dormitories, places to keep our clothes, sleep and sometimes eat or "veg out", exhausted, before the TV, rather than family homes. Personal and family values are subordinated to the inexorable demands of the workplace. People lose sight of the needs of children. Human beings exist, it seems, to serve the economy, rather than the economy existing to serve us, our families and the community.

"Work" has changed its meaning. We used to "go to work" ie to paid employment, but we also "worked" around the house, for the church, and in the community. We had time to care for children, cook, sew, mow the lawn, do some carpentry, garden, visit our friends and do voluntary work in the community.

"Work" now, it seems, is valued, at least by economists and business, only as a "paid production factor". Work serves materialism and consumption. Everything is said to be of equal value - the basic foodstuffs on which we depend for life are said to have no more value than the latest video game. It is becoming too expensive to care for one another at home - we give priority to paid employment; and too expensive to pay others to care for people - governments claim we cannot afford to pay, as a community, to care for children, or the aged, or the environment, for our culture, or for human rights.

We produce more material goods with less human labour, using technology. We buy more goods than ever before. Yet people want more things and feel dissatisfied. We have highly developed "service industries", yet cannot adequately care for one another.

In this brave new world of "work", what are we offering young people? What, as a society, are we telling them about the purpose of employment (to produce goods and services for the market?), the purpose of family (to be a consumption unit and generate production units, ie workers?), the purpose and goal of human existence (to increase GDP?) How are human and spiritual values to survive? How are our young people to survive as they face a future in which non-material values have no apparent place? Even when our society claims to support social values, or decries their loss, the experience it offers young people leaves no room to practice such values. "Value" itself has taken on a different meaning - the price paid in the market.

For reflection before, during and after synod:

What is your response to the questions posed in the preceding paragraph?

Effects on young people

Research suggests that children and young people are significantly affected by these trends in society. In some research young people have expressed "a strong sense of negativity, helplessness, despondency and even anguish' about the anticipated problems facing our society and the world...The great majority believed a 'hard' or violent technological image of the future was likely or very likely". (Richard Eckersley: "Values and visions: young people and the failure of modern Western culture" in *Youth Studies Australia* Autumn 1995)

This research is only part of the picture, but it raises significant issues for the church. We cannot let these trends go unchallenged and unchanged - they contradict both human rights and our understanding of the Gospel of Christ.

Australia has a high youth suicide rate. In the last forty years, it has trebled for young males. Up to 11% of high school students have attempted suicide: relatively few succeed. Medical models of prevention cannot deal with the underlying issues of alienation, loss of value, loss of identity. Youth suicide is one of the warning signs of how sick our society is becoming. It might well be that the increasing incidence of anorexia and mental illness are others.

Does it have to be this way?

Bob Goudzwaard and Harry de Lange are two academics in the field of economics. They have been involved in ecumenical reflection on economic matters for many years. They talk about six paradoxes in the modern economy:

The scarcity paradox: Our society, a society of unprecedented wealth, experiences unprecedented scarcity.

The poverty paradox: Poverty is rising sharply in the midst of wealthy societies.

The care paradox: In the midst of more wealth, we have fewer opportunities to practice care than before.

The labour paradox: Our society's need for more labour is becoming critical even as unemployment rises.

The health paradox: Even though our level of health care has increased, our level of disease is rising.

The time paradox: Despite substantially more wealth, we have less and less time in our lives.

(Bob Goudzwaard and Harry de Lange: *Beyond poverty and affluence: towards an economy of care* Geneva: WCC 1995)

They describe three "economic impasses" that the present economic system cannot solve and is making worse: poverty, damage to the environment, and unemployment.

They suggest that the problem is that there is a confusion between means and ends. We need to move from an economy of production to an *economy of care*. We need to move from an economy based on wants and the market, to an *economy of enough*, ie an economy based on genuine human needs, an economy designed to provide those things which everyone needs for survival, before it provides luxuries.

In such an economy, the value of work would depend on what it contributes to the well-being of human beings and the environment, and not on what those on higher incomes want to buy in the marketplace.

A values-based future?

What future will we offer our young people, and their children, and grandchildren? The world that we are making today is the world in which they will have to live and work - long after most members of this synod are gone. Human society depends on human values, human relationships, human commitments to care for one another and to sustain the natural environment which provides our sustenance.

God gave the whole world to humankind to meet our needs, and to delight in. What world of work, and what understanding of economy, would serve these human, spiritual values, rather than destroying them? What world of work would sustain and nourish our young people instead of alienating them? What "social capital" are we going to pass on to future generations?

Now as never before, we have to set broad long-term goals for our society -not just economic, social or environmental objectives, but goals that define, in broad terms, the totality of how we are to live - and manage change towards those ends. As the Commission for the Future's motto said: "First we have to imagine a better future, then we can build towards it". (Richard Eckersley)

This session will explore these issues and some of the options for solving them.

For reflection before, during and after synod:

What is your vision of a better future? What world of work, and what understanding of economy, would serve these human, spiritual values, rather than destroying them? What world of work would sustain and nourish our young people instead of alienating them? How can the church contribute to building this new future?

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